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WHO FOLLOW THE FLAG

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HENRY VAN DYKE

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WHO FOLLOW THE FLAG

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PHI BETA KAPPA POEM
HARVARD UNIVERSITY
JUNE 1910

BY

HENRY VAN DYKE

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I

All day long in the city's canyon-street,
With its populous cliffs alive on either side,
I saw a river of marching men like a tide
Flowing after the flag: and the rhythmic beat
Of the drums, and the bugles' resonant blare
Metred the tramp, tramp, tramp of a myriad feet,
While the red-white-and-blue was fluttering everywhere,
And the heart of the crowd kept time to a martial air:

O brave flag, O bright flag, O flag to lead the free!
The glory of thy silver stars,
Engrailed in blue above the bars
Of red for courage, white for truth,
Have brought the world a second youth
And drawn a hundred million hearts to follow after thee.

II

Old Cambridge saw thee first unfurled,
By Washington's far-reaching hand,
To greet, in Seventy-six, the wintry morn
Of a new year, and herald to the world
Glad tidings from a Western land,—
A people and a hope new-born!
The double cross then filled thine azure field,
In token of a spirit loath to yield
The breaking ties that bound thee to a throne.
But not for long thine oriflamme could bear
That symbol of an outworn trust in kings.
The wind that bore thee out on widening wings
Called for a greater sign and all thine own,—
A new device to speak of heavenly laws
And lights that surely guide the people's cause.
Oh, greatly did they hope, and greatly dare,
Who bade the stars in heaven fight for them,
And set upon their battle-flag a fair
New constellation as a diadem!
Along the blood-stained banks of Brandywine
The ragged regiments were rallied to this sign;

Through Saratoga's woods it fluttered bright
Amid the perils of the hard-won fight;
O'er Yorktown's meadows broad and green
It hailed the glory of the final scene;
And when at length Manhattan saw
The last invaders' line of scarlet coats
Pass Bowling Green, and fill the waiting boats,
And sullenly withdraw,
The flag that proudly flew
Above the battered line of buff and blue,
Marching, with rattling drums and shrilling pipes,
Along the Bowery and down Broadway,
Was this that leads the great parade to-day,—
The glorious banner of the stars and stripes.

First of the flags of earth to dare
A heraldry so high;
First of the flags of earth to bear
The blazons of the sky;
Long may thy constellation glow,
Foretelling happy fate;
Wider thy starry circle grow,—
And every star a State!

III

Pass on, pass on, ye flashing files
Of men who march in militant array;
Ye thrilling bugles, throbbing drums,
Ring out, roll on, and die away;
And fade, ye crowds, with the fading day!
Around the city's lofty piles
Of steel and stone
The lilac veil of dusk is thrown,
Entangled full of sparks of fairy light;
And the never-silent heart of the city hums
To a homeward-turning tune before the night.
But far above, on the sky-line's broken height,
From all the towers and domes outlined
In gray and gold along the city's crest,
I see the rippling flag still take the wind
With a promise of coming good for all mankind.

IV

O banner of the West,
No proud and brief parade,
That glorifies a nation's holiday
With show of troops for warfare dressed
Can rightly measure or display
The mighty army thou hast made
Loyal to guard thy more than royal sway.
Millions have come across the sea
To find beneath thy shelter room to grow;
Millions were born beneath thy folds and know
No other flag but thee;
And other, darker millions bore the yoke
Of bondage in thy borders till the voice
Of Lincoln spoke,
And sent thee forth to set the bondmen free.
Rejoice, dear flag, rejoice!
Since thou hast proved and passed that bitter strife,

Richer thy red with blood of heroes wet,
Purer thy white through sacrificial life,
Brighter thy blue wherein new stars are set!
Thou art become a sign,
Revealed in heaven to speak of things divine:
Of Truth that dares
To slay the lie it sheltered unawares;
Of Courage fearless in the fight,
Yet ever quick its foemen to forgive;
Of Conscience earnest to maintain its right
And gladly grant the same to all who live.
Thy staff is deeply planted in the fact
That nothing can ennoble man
Save his own act,
And naught can make him worthy to be free
But practice in the school of liberty.
The cords are two that lift thee to the sky:
Firm faith in God, the King who rules on high;
And never-failing trust
In human nature, full of faults and flaws,
Yet ever-answering to the inward call
That bids it set the "ought" above the "must";
In all its errors wiser than it seems,
In all its failures full of generous dreams,

Through endless conflict rising without pause
To self-dominion, charactered in laws
That pledge fair-play alike to great and small,
And equal rights for each beneath the rule
of all.
These are thy halyards, banner bold,
And while these hold,
Thy brightness from the sky shall never fall,
Thy broadening empire never know decrease,—
Thy strength is union and thy glory peace.

V

Look forth across thy widespread lands,
O flag, and let thy stars to-night be eyes
To see the visionary hosts
Of men and women grateful to be thine,
That joyfully arise
From all thy borders and thy coasts,
And follow after thee in endless line!
They lift to thee a forest of saluting hands;
They hail thee with a rolling ocean-roar
Of cheers; and as the echo dies,
There comes a sweet and moving song
Of treble voices from the childish throng
Who run to thee from every school-house door.
Behold thine army! Here thy power lies:
The men whom freedom has made strong,
And bound to follow thee by willing vows;
The women greatened by the joys
Of motherhood to rule a happy house;
The vigorous girls and boys,

Whose eager faces and unclouded brows
Foretell the future of a noble race,
Rich in the wealth of wisdom and true worth!
While millions such as these to thee belong,
What foe can do thee wrong,
What jealous rival rob thee of thy place
Foremost of all the flags of earth?

VI

My vision darkens as the night descends;
And through the mystic atmosphere
I feel the creeping coldness that portends
A change of spirit in my dream.
The multitude that moved with song and cheer
Have vanished, yet a living stream
Flows on and follows still the flag,
But silent now, with leaden feet that lag
And falter in the deepening gloom,—
A weird battalion bringing up the rear.
Ah, who are these on whom the vital bloom
Of life has withered to the dust of doom?
These little pilgrims prematurely worn
And bent as if they bore the weight of years?
These childish faces, pallid and forlorn,
Too dull for laughter and too hard for tears?
Is this the ghost of that insane crusade
That led ten thousand children long ago,
A flock of innocents, deceived, betrayed,

Yet pressing on through want and woe
To meet their fate, faithful and unafraid?
Nay, for a million children now
Are marching in the long pathetic line,
With weary step and early wrinkled brow;
And at their head appears no holy sign
Of hope in heaven;
For unto them is given
No cross to carry, but a cross to drag.
Before their strength is ripe they bear
The load of labour, toiling underground
In dangerous mines and breathing heavy air
Of crowded shops; their tender lives are bound
To service of the whirling, clattering wheels
That fill the factories with dust and noise;
They are not girls and boys,
But little "hands" who blindly, dumbly feed
With their own blood the hungry god of Greed.
Robbed of their natural joys,
And wounded with a scar that never heals,
They stumble on with heavy-laden soul,
And fall by thousands on the highway lined
With little graves, or reach at last their goal
Of stunted manhood and embittered age,
To brood awhile with dark and troubled mind,

Beside the smouldering fire of sullen rage,
On life's unfruitful work and niggard wage.
Are these the regiments that Freedom rears
To serve her cause in coming years?
Nay, every life that Avarice doth maim
And beggar in the helpless days of youth,
Shall surely claim
A just revenge, and take it without ruth;
And every soul denied the right to grow
Beneath the flag, shall be its secret foe.
Bow down, dear land, in penitence and shame!
Remember now thine oath, so nobly sworn,
To guard an equal lot
For every child within thy borders born:
These are thy children whom thou hast forgot!
They have the bitter right to live, but not
The blessed right to look for happiness.
O lift thy liberating hand once more,
To loose thy little ones from dark duress;
The vital gladness to their hearts restore
In healthful lessons and in happy play;
And set them free to climb the upward way
That leads to self-reliant nobleness.
Speak out, my country, speak at last,
As thou hast spoken in the past,

And clearly, bravely say:
My power shall defend
The coming race on whom my hopes depend:
Henceforward on my sacred soil
No child shall bear the crushing yoke of toil.

VII

Look up, look up, ye downcast eyes!
The night is almost gone:
Along the new horizon flies
The banner of the dawn;
The eastern sky is banded low
With white and crimson bars,
And far above the morning glow
The everlasting stars.

O bright flag, O brave flag, O flag to lead the free!
The hand of God thy colours blent,
And heaven to earth thy glory lent,
To shield the weak, and guide the strong
To make an end of human wrong,
And draw a countless human host to follow after thee!

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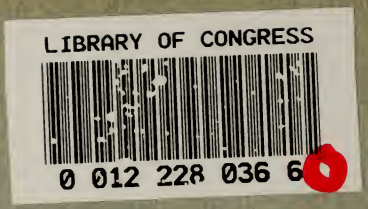
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